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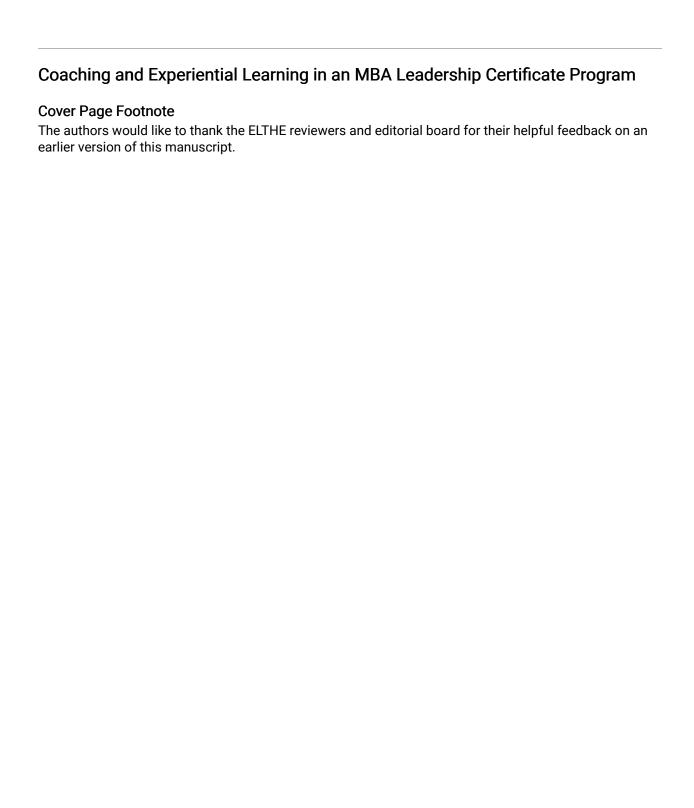
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Coaching and Experiential Learning in an MBA Leadership Certificate Program

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Introduction

The pandemic that plagued 2020 and 2021 has exposed the need for businesses and universities to rapidly adjust to the globe's dynamic and volatile environments, in order to create and sustain competitive advantages. University educators, particularly those in tuition-driven institutions, worried about first year admissions, enrollments, and ensuring safety in a time when so much in the world was unknown. What was known during this time, however, was that universities would still be delivering courses in either online video calls (with software such as Zoom) or face-to-face meetings following government guidelines, or a hybrid of both. No matter the distance of the classroom, many educators were called to ensure high quality content through experiential deliveries.

In MBA programs, university instructors operate with the knowledge that they're helping to train and develop current and future world business leaders. Various approaches are used to that end, but one particularly effective means of leadership development is by pairing students with coaches (Lawrence, Dunn, & Weisfeld-Spolter, 2017). Coaches

use self-assessments, reflections, and goal-setting to impact engagement and academic success in educational institutions (Robinson & Gahagan, 2010). One meta-analytic study of coaching in organizational contexts found that coaching has a positive impact on performance/ skills, coping, work attitudes, goal-directed self-regulation, and well-being (Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2013), which are obviously beneficial to those being coached. Given these beneficial outcomes, offering coaching in MBA programs may be one way to distinguish universities from competitors, which may be particularly useful in times of economic uncertainty.

In the present study, we used Kolb and Kolb's (2017) framework to examine reflection papers from the coaching component of an MBA leadership certificate program at a medium-sized university in the southeastern region of the United States. This study is a single-site case study (Stake, 2006; Burns & Danyluk, 2017) that examined one bounded university context. We examined ways participants set goals, contextualized their experiences, and considered ways to achieve their goals in the midst of the

pandemic in the fall of 2020. We made our observations through the lenses of educator roles in the Experiential Learning Cycle, which are two components of Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Experiential Learning Theory provides an intellectual foundation for the practice of experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Its components include the Experiential Learning Cycle, Experiential Learning Styles, and Experiential Learning Space. During the Experiential Learning Cycle, educators wear multiple hats as facilitators, subject experts, standard setters and evaluators, and coaches. The present study provides evidence in support of these components of Experiential Learning Theory via the use of student reflection papers in the transformation of knowledge. Educators who establish coaching programs in educational institutions may find our examples helpful in building their own programs.

The Experiential Learning Cycle

The Experiential Learning Cycle is a holistic, dynamic process that starts with a concrete experience, followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualization of the experience, and active experimentation. According to Kolb and Kolb (2017), through the cycle of learning "all participants receive information through concrete experience of the subject matter and transform it through reflection and conceptualization and then transform it again by acting to change the world including what information is attended to in the new experience" (p. 16).

Educator Roles and the Learning Cycle

Educators can use a variety of means to

ensure their learning outcomes are met. KolbandKolb(2017)reportedonemeans:

In our interviews and observations of highly successful educators, we find that they tend to organize their educational activities in such a manner that they address all four learning cycle modes-experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting-using some form of the dynamic matching model in the roles they adopt. We developed a self-assessment instrument called the Kolb Educator Role Profile (KERP) to help educators understand their own teaching approach from the perspective of teaching around the learning cycle (p. 17)

According to Kolb and Kolb (2017), roles are specifically applied to the learning cycle in the following ways. At the concrete experience phase, the educator is a warm and affirmative facilitator who creates a personal relationship with the student, promotes inside-out learning, and focuses on meaning. Inside learning is centered on the self, while outside learning is centered on content, so inside-out learning bridges outward-focused content and an inward-focused process to move from superficial reflections to reflective analysis and introspection (Hubbs & Brand, 2010). At the reflective observation phase, the educator is a reflective, authoritative subject expert who analyzes and organizes the subject matter. At the abstract conceptualization (thinking) phase, the educator is a standard setter and evaluator who sets performance objectives. At the active experimentation phase, the educator is a coach who works one-on-one with learners and provides developmental feedback. Kolb and Kolb (2017) note that all phases of the Experiential Learning Cycle are experiences, not simply the "concrete experience" phase. As the authors note:

Many use the term experiential learning to refer to exercises and games used to involve students in the learning process. However, a classroom lecture may be an abstract experience but it is also a concrete one, when, for example, a learner admires and imitates the lecturer. Likewise, a learner may work hard to create an abstract model in order to make sense of an internship experience or experiential exercise. From the learner's perspective, solitary reflection can be an intensely emotional concrete experience and the action of programming a computer can be a highly abstract experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2017, p. 13)

In the present study, we questioned whether the *educator roles* in the Experiential Learning Cycle posited by Kolb and Kolb (2017) would help to frame and inform an MBA leadership certificate program with a coaching component. We examined qualitative student reflection papers to address this research question. The present research expands upon findings from a prior exploratory qualitative study of themes derived from reflections on MBA coaching sessions (Thomason, Andersen, Gupta, & Rustogi, 2021).

MBA Leadership Certificate Program

In 2010, we moved from a 3-credit model to a 4-credit model in the undergraduate and graduate programs in the College of Business and significantly revised our Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program requirements. Among changes, we began to require a 4-credit professional development practicum in which students could choose from a variety of experiential options to complete.

We designed these options to be "RE-ALISTIC," which is an acronym we used at the time to describe our pillars of experiential education. The acronym RE-ALISTIC includes Research, Education Abroad, Leadership, Internships, Service Learning, and Teaching Interactively in the Classroom. These pillars closely aligned with the course requirements of the Experiential Education Academy of the National Society for Experiential Education, yet we explicitly added a leadership pillar to fit in with the overall vision and mission of our College of Business. We designated education abroad courses, internships, SAP (enterprise resource planning) certification workshops, independent research studies, and other courses for meeting our practicum requirements, and we designated certain faculty as program overseers to approve students' selections. By 2016, we decided to add three 2-credit courses to provide additional options for students. These three courses focused on business communication and interpersonal skills, career development, and leadership.

We invested significant time in the latter offering by creating a leadership certificate and integrating feedback from focus groups of community leaders and members of our Center for Leadership. Our leadership certificate is a teamtaught course that provides content on current issues in leadership, advancing in an organization, and implementing leadership concepts. Within the current issues are modules on the essence of leadership, our Strategic Leadership Workshop, and multigenerational implications for the future at work. The second section features modules on legal issues in human resource management, leading teams and increasing productivity, integrative negotiations, and mastering innovation by tapping into an entrepreneurial mindset. The implementation section includes modules on strategic thinking, blue ocean strategy and blue ocean leadership, and participant personal action plan presentations.

We developed our leadership certificate to achieve the following learning outcomes: "At the conclusion of [the leadership course], students will be able to thoughtfully reflect upon and effectively communicate how their experience (1) enhanced their career development objectives, leadership skills, and interpersonal skills, and (2) increased their involvement in the academic community and the business and professional community." We have strived to continuously improve our leadership certificate offerings over the years by attending closely to student learning outcomes and course feedback. The feedback from the program has consistently suggested one of the strongest elements of our MBA leadership certificate program is our coaching component to which we now turn our attention. Since 2003, we have paired our MBA students with professional coaches who are either community leaders or members of coaching groups such as the International Coaching Federation. In 2016, we formalized these offerings by integrating coaching into our leadership certificate. We assign participants with coaches to help students achieve their personal action plans and goals.

MBA Coaching

In the beginning of the fall of 2020, we asked 21 students who were enrolled in an MBA leadership certificate course to participate in an IRB-approved research study that would identify themes from

their reflections on their meetings with their coaches. Of the 20 who agreed to participate, 13 were male and 7 were female. Most of the coaches in this cohort were affiliated with the International Coaching Federation and many had served our university voluntarily for years. Oftentimes the relationships between students and their coaches continued far past the end of the semester.

To enhance experiential education, we designed our program to align with the eight principles of best practices of the National Society for Experiential Education (1998), which are to (1) establish intention; (2) prepare and plan; (3) ensure authenticity; (4) orient and train; (5) include reflections; (6) monitor and ensure continuous improvement; 7) assess and evaluate; (8) and acknowledge and recognize success. Our intentions align with the mission of our college, which is to provide educational excellence. We believe educational excellence is best achieved not by the "sage on the stage," but by more student-centered, outcomes-focused, personalized learning approaches such as those provided in one-on-one student-coach relationships. To ensure students are prepared for our MBA coaching experience more specifically, we provide relevant required readings on leadership, coaching, and professional development prior to our Strategic Leadership Workshop. Our Strategic Leadership Workshop is facilitated by two seasoned coaches from the International Coaching Federation. The inclusion of these seasoned coaches helps to establish authenticity. The workshop is a 3-hour-long activity-filled session where the two coaches share insights and lessons from their own experiences and the assigned readings. They further facilitate

multiple meetings during the workshop for the students and coaches to complete a variety of experiential goal-setting exercises. Following the workshop, students meet three times with their coaches to discuss their plans and goals for the semester and beyond. They are required to contribute one structured reflection paper after each of their three meetings. Our MBA coaches have been provided a six-hour (over two nights) training session to ensure consistency in student coach interactions. In this session, we ask our many seasoned coaches to meet with our new coaches to share best practices. They often engage in role-play exercises where the newer coach acts as a student and the seasoned coach acts as his or her coach. Once our coaches have been trained, we assign them (usually no more than) one or two students per semester. Each year, we continuously monitor learning outcomes, coach training feedback, and student reflections to ensure our coaching program is benefiting our students in positive, impactful ways. We assess learning outcomes through readings, lectures, participation in and contributions to group discussions and exercises, participation in the graduate coaching program, and an individual five-page paper and presentation. The program culminates with each student presenting his or her leadership plan to our course facilitators and members of our Leadership Center's Board of Directors. We acknowledge and celebrate their achievements by presenting their leadership certificates to them in a formal way by calling their names, awarding them certificates, and playing traditional graduation ceremony music (such as "Pomp and Circumstance"). We further acknowledge and celebrate our coaches by hosting a celebratory dinner at the end of each spring. In the spring of 2020 and 2021, however, we have had to postpone these dinners due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but we plan to resume the dinners in the spring of 2022.

By the end of the fall 2020 semester, each of the participants had submitted three reflection papers, which the first author of this manuscript analyzed and coded according to the four phases in the Experiential Learning Cycle. The author identified whether portions of the student reflections were consistent with Kolb's expectations of educator roles during the process and created an Excel spreadsheet with quotations from the participants under each of the categories. The second author separately examined the reflections and quotes to establish interrater reliability, which we achieved when we came to a full agreement. Though the participants were not primed to consider the Kolb and Kolb (2017) framework, we found remarkable consistency in the way their responses could be applied to the framework. During the concrete experience phase, 70 percent reported they had developed a personal relationship with their coaches. While reflecting on their experiences, 90 percent reported that their coaches helped them to analyze and organize the subject matter. Through conceptualizations, 90 percent reported their coaches set performance objectives and standards. Finally, while testing and acting upon what they learned, 70 percent reported their coaches provided one-on-one developmental feedback. The next portion of this study will present the phases of the Experiential Learning Cycle along with five representative quotes for each from the aforementioned reflection papers.

Concrete Experience

Students met with their coaches for the first time in the second week of classes at our Strategic Leadership Workshop, which we delivered via Zoom (due to COVID-19). Prior to the workshop, we asked students to send short biographies to the second author, which she compiled and forwarded to the coaches. The coaches then chose the students with whom they planned to work. We asked students to read several leadership articles and watch Simon Sinek's Ted Talk on "The Big Why." During the workshop, students

shared their "Big Why," which was a sentence on their purpose in life. Most expressed the desire for purpose and meaning, often saying they wished to make the world a little better than the way they found it. The coaches also shared their own "Big Why" mission statements. Participants next met with their coaches in Zoom breakout rooms. At the close of the workshop, students were given instructions to meet with their coaches three times over the semester for a period of an hour each time either face-to-face or in person, depending on what the two agreed upon.

Table 1. Student Reflections on the Concrete Experience Phase

Student ID	Warm and affirmative facilitator who creates a personal relationship, promotes inside-out learning, and focuses on meaning.
2	"As I began to open up to [my coach] towards the end of the class session, he made sure he remembered important things about me (like one bad experience with a client that I briefly mentioned) [My coach] and I both opened up about our past and what has led us to where we are today. This helped so much because I realized we had so much in common especially personality types. The main thing I enjoyed learning about is that we both like to learn about the mind & the way people think as we use that to implement it into our daily life."
3	"Right off the bat, we spent 30-45 minutes (of our hour-long session) talking about our backgrounds, work experience, and family life. After hearing about my work-life and personal life, he quickly identified that time management was a topic we should discuss and drill into."
5	"[My coach] was very relatable, making it a point to talk to me like a colleague instead of a studentThe session felt extremely personalized and my coach made me feel comfortable by sharing her own personal struggles. I felt like she related to my story a lot because she also had issues with confidence when she was starting out. Looking at the woman she is today, I felt confident in all the advice she gave me on growing and improving as a leader."
16	"My original expectation, of skepticism, was disproven by the sheer professionalism and intuition that [my coach] brought to the table. I underestimated my coach's ability to acutely analyze and assess the responses and feedback I was providing. I was impressed with her keen sense of active listening. By doing so, she was quick to pick up on some of the drivers and root causes to some of my leadership blind spots."
19	"My expectations were exceeded by [my coach's] personality, we got along great she was easy to talk to and I loved all her advice about managing my stress levels. My Coach was able to help me take a closer look on how many other aspects of my life uses Logistics and how I might be able to take my passions and convert them into a fulltime job."

The approaches our MBA coaches used in their coaching sessions with the students varied as a function of the coaches' and students' preferences. Most coaches gave students homework assignments, such as reading books on leadership or overcoming challenges. They also directed students to identify their goals and create an action plan with specific deadlines to achieve the goals that they and their coaches had Table 1 presents participant reflections on their experiences with their coaches, which include comments about the personalization of the experiences and relationship-building.

Reflection

According to Kolb (1984), reflection is a component of learning that builds upon existing knowledge to develop better understanding of one's concrete experiences. Previous studies have found that structured written reflections significantly increased personal growth and personal self-efficacy, while unstructured reflections resulted in no changes in growth or self-efficacy (Sanders, Van Oss, & McGeary, 2016). Reflection in a university context has various characteristics. As Dobbs-Oates notes, "[s] ome of the key characteristics of reflection my students consistently notice are that reflection is active and intentional, that reflection is repeated and

Table 2. Student Reflections on the Reflection Phase: What?

Student ID	Reflective and authoritative subject matter expert who analyzes and organizes the subject matter.
1	"When managing procrastination, [my coach] first explained to me that reprioritizing and understanding the importance of goals and tasks is a very crucial step[My coach] explained that simple things such as using a calendar, setting reminders, setting alarms, using a planner, etc. are all very effective methods of limiting procrastination."
4	"A quote from [my coach] that really stuck out to me was 'Managers are judged on their behaviors, not on their intentions.' A big take-away from our MB discussion was for me to constantly self-monitor (not obsessively though!). I need to ask things like, 'What didn't I ask that I should have?' Additionally, monitoring how I phrase my questions is hugely effective."
8	"I have thought about being an account manager, a fundraiser for a non-profit, a corporate social responsibility manager, nonprofit consultant, and even working in sales. While these jobs have many differences, [my coach] helped me identify a common theme which is that I enjoy roles where I can interact with customers. I also enjoy roles driven by metrics, such as a sales or fundraising position where I have a clearly defined goal."
11	"In order to grow as a financial advisor, we discussed that one must be very personable and surround themselves with the right people. [My coach] recommended looking at things like Facebook groups, Eventbrite, Meetup.com and LinkedIn groups."
12	[My coach] not only gave me feedback on my plan but also started immediately thinking about ways he could connect me to the right people. He encouraged me by telling me he liked the plan I had come up with and made me feel confident in what I was going to do."

extended over time, and that reflection is careful and thoughtful. Often, it falls to me to mention that reflection involves connecting ideas to evidence and to conclusions as well" (2021, p. 11).

In the present study, we asked students to complete written reflections using the DEAL model of structured articulated learning (Ash & Clayton, 2004) where they (1) identified and described an expectation they had prior to the coaching experience; (2) specified how the expectation applied; (3) analyzed the ways their expectations were not met, met, or exceeded; and (4) evaluated how the coaching experience could have been improved. The DEAL model addresses the questions, "What?" "So what?" and "Now what?" (Koustas & Blais, 2021). These questions are also answered through Experiential Learning Theory in that the reflection phase answers the first question, the abstract conceptualization phase answers the second question, and the active experimentation phase answers the final question. According to Koustas and Blais (2021), the "what" question gives learners the opportunity to describe their experiences in detail. Table 2 presents quotations from participant reflections where they honed in on their own learning, development, and goals.

Abstract Conceptualization

Koustas and Blais (2021) note that the abstract conceptualization phase coincides with asking "So what?". Learners not only report their experiences, but they describe what their experiences meant to them. Table 3 presents quotations from participant reflections where they worked closely with their coaches to set goals and performance objectives, noting the impact and meaning of their goals.

Active Experimentation

As noted by Koustas and Blais (2021), the active experimentation phase involves asking the question "Now what?". Table 4 presents quotations from participant reflections where they discussed their take-aways and action plans. They often re-framed their circumstances in the context of their meetings with their coaches and new outlooks they developed.

Conclusion

Previous research has found that MBA programs can add value to MBA alumni and the organizations for which they work through increased knowledge and skills (Gupta & Bennett, 2014). In the present study, we detailed the way we developed our MBA leadership certificate program and its MBA coaching component. Within the latter context, we analyzed student reflection papers through the lenses of the Experiential Learning Cycle and educator roles to identify student examples of learning and knowledge transformation. Our findings indicated that students worked with their coaches to set goals and create action plans with deadlines to achieve their goals. The variety of approaches and experiential learning activities the coaches used helped to strengthen their relationships with the students and to help them learn and often re-frame their circumstances to positively enhance their development and knowledge.

Our findings can be used by coaches and educators to strengthen student/coach relationships and to establish a framework through which we can better understand the dyadic relationships between students and their coaches. Coaches may consider explicitly structuring their conversations with students

Table 3. Student Reflections on the Abstract Conceptualization Phase: So What?

Student ID	Standard setter and evaluator who sets performance objectives
2	"We created two separate sessions (personal and professional) we also created timeframes for my goals (years, months, weeks, daily). We had some fun and talked about the model 'fake it until you make it' which means if I fake that I enjoy my 5 am run every day, I will trick my mind into actually begin to enjoy that activity."
3	"This session was all about my 5-year plan. My homework prior to this session was to populate an Excel document that contained a couple columns:
	i. What makes me happy?
	ii. What traits and skills am I proud of?
	iii. What do I not enjoy?
	iv. What do I want more of?"
7	"My expectations were exceeded because not only did I gain clarity and understand where my weaknesses are, he helped me set SMART goals on how to tackle these tasks and issues."
13	"Due to the first session was talking about my past, so for the second time I thought it would be the same. However, coach brought me to set up the goals and thought about my "why"."
14	"I really appreciated her point of view and that she was so quick to start setting short term goals for me. I need someone who can guide me and hold me accountable to these actions."

using Experiential Learning Theory roles and the four stages (experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, experimentation) of the Experiential Learning Cycle to transform their experiences into knowledge. Our findings can also be used by educators interested in Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2017) as it provides some qualitative support for educator roles and the Experiential Learning Cycle.

We should add that our findings are not without limitations due to the generalizability of our relatively small single-university-based sample. Future studies may consider applying the Kolb and Kolb (2017) framework to other contexts and locations. Future studies

and coaching administrators and facilitators may further consider ways to ensure that 100 percent of the dyadic coach/student relationships include the four roles of the Experiential Learning Cycle as the present study ranged between 70 (stages one and four) and 90 percent (stages two and three). An examination of whether achieving 100 percent may enhance learning outcomes is certainly warranted.

Table 4. Student Reflections on the Active Experimentation Phase: Now what?

Student ID	Coach who works one-on-one to provide developmental feedback
6	"What I took away most from our last conversation was that I need to relax and realize that this position is more of a marathon than a sprint. I should implement change, but doing so in a slow and patient way. [My coach] explained that although it may seem daunting to go from one end of the spectrum to the other as far as leadership and management styles go, you can get there by making slight changes, rather than making all the changes at once. This was really a crucial lesson for me to absorb and made me feel much better about the situation. I also felt that Bob really started to help me see the vision that I see for myself in a leadership role at my company."
12	"Not only did he help me understand what I wanted to do but also he is actively helping me attain my goals in any way he can. As a student who came into this coaching with no expectations his effort is all I can ask for and he has given me that."
15	"Further, the description of results-oriented people as prioritizing independence and preferring to work alone resonated very strongly with me. I do believe that I have good listening and interpersonal skills, but I recognize that my style can be overbearing. In fact, during the third coaching session I received a call from one of my oldest friends. As I needed to quickly convey information, I was very direct, curt, and perhaps even rude. [My coach] pointed this out, and while I tried to offer up an explanation of my friend, who is known for being slow to hang up the phone, his point was salient.?
17	"I had to ask [my coach], 'Where do I go from here and how do I change?' I needed help from an outside perspective to guide me away from my fear of rejection in leadership. Angela had a few practical steps that helped open my eyes: 1). Become Aware of the fear or negative thoughts. 2). Distinguish between the lie and a truth 3). Write down the negative thought that comes up as this will prevent suppression and 4). Start a gratitude journal to begin fueling my brain with gratitude and appreciation. [My coach] explained the physiological side of addressing this in a practical way: writing down the fear will literally move the thought from the emotional right side of the brain where the emotional impact occurs into the analytical left brain where you can challenge the emotion with truth. [My coach] encouraged me to try this tactic every time I began feeling vulnerable. She went on to further explain how the daily gratitude journal was only possible if and when I removed the 'junk' thoughts."
20	"A recurring theme emerged that focused on ensuring that all views and experiences were taken into account during the decision-making process. The interactive exchange between myself and [my coach] was extremely beneficial in continuing to develop and enhance my own leadership style."

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